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THE MUMMERS

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DEDICATION.

To all those people
Who have traveled this road forward,
Have sojourned in my life
As in a wayside 'coffeehouse,
Then have turned or gone onward,
I give this book.'
But to all those travelers coming
Who say: "here is good to dwell"
I will bring the choicest jams from my cupboard
And the best fruits from my orchard,
Though it be only a pear or a handfull of berries.

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THE MUMMERS

THE MUMMERS

They never seem taken aback,
Never even glad to come nose to nose
With a brother mummer or sister,
Whose frozen feature may stick
Out from behind a wing in a showhouse,
Or a pile of trunks or boxes or canvas drops
In some lobby of hotel or lodging house,
A thousand miles or two from the last meeting.

"Hello, Jake! Hello, Jane!

What company are you with now?"

"None, if not my own, for I've sworn
To hang on my own hook since Jasper-

Have you heard of the low-life stiff?-

Broke our outfit in Idaho, Malad.

And left us like rats in a church,

With a nickle and a penny in a crack,

Where they rolled when he riffled the box.

Now, I'll tell you..."

"Have you seen my act?" This from De la Mare,
Irishman, or whosoever has found

A listener in O'Brien, Spartan hercules.
"Did I say act? My act is no act.
Rather a piece of hot flesh
Torn from life as she is lived."
He frowns, talking to himself,
But nevertheless he will talk and talk,
Leaving no opening anywhere,
For though the other be deaf,
He is not dumb, and will, when time comes,
Burst into frozen speech, praising
His outfit and himself
In two hundred and fifty words.
And they will wiggle on
Like stuffed fish on a wall
Who could do what they were meant to do
If there were water.
So it was with Aristos, Lopez and Annette,
All three genuine names,
Taken from old plays of Lope and Moliere:
Each satisfied with the name taken,
But not with the plays they found them in.

"This is not life," Aristos said.

"I see nothing here."

Lopez saw something; so he said.

"This Gentilhomme will do,

Since not writ for you, Aristos"

Annette, a country girl, Aristos' wife,

She didn't understand anything, if not

Cows and chickens, but never

Her actor husband, nor anything he did.

He had found her in Kansas,

At a small town put up at for the night,

A snud-nosed, freckled milk-maid,

Who listened in wonderment to his strange words

And his strange manner of wooing.

But he had picked her just for that,-

Close to the soil, but not by root

Not for what she knew of acting,

Nor for what she knew of life

As lived or acted off stage or on,

But for what she did not know.

He might have had for wife

A great star, prima donna, so he said
And believed so himself.
But what should his life be thus
But an act, one long and dreary act,
At the show, or offstage at the hotel?
"Man liveth not by bread alone," said Aristos,
A phrase coined by him.

"Give me life as she is lived,"
Another of Aristos' phrases, was more
Than a mere phrase, meant more to him,
Though Lucy, his co-star scoffed:
"Let me live as in our act, if you can afford,
And you can have me whole and as you will."
Aristos frowned. "What are you, Lucy,
But a chorus-girl still, as you were
When I took you on? And I,
Who could have had a star for spouse,
Or even as you suggested, free of ties.
But you shall be a star yet, Lucy,
Wrought by my master hand.

Ha, ha! I laugh myself at such talk,
But not at the idea.
You believe in my new play, don't you, Lucy?
So you have said yourself.
So do I. We are one on that.
I have read it to Annette, poor wife,
But she doesn't understand anything."
This was true. He had waved the script
Before her upstart nose,
Revealing life as lived, as seen
Through a key-hole or a window
Where no shade has been drawn.
"Now, Annette, little wife, listen.
This is all in the play, understand?
Play of mine, but all the same like life.
This play has two stars, I myself-
You know me - and another, Lucy by name.
There is another too, but of small consequence,
Though he may think himself a star.

All clear?" "Wonderfull," said Annette,
Clapping her little hands.

"Not yet, Annette, not so soon.

But it's coming now. I begin.

A girl's bed-room is the scene. Such things

Go well. She is alone and lonely too.

Her husband's out. He is not there.

She loves him- well, some, and he her

A little- not so much. Now get this:

There is another man. This is I,

And the main star, but a skunk.

But only in the play, you understand.

Did I say skunk? Hard word that.

But it will serve. A star

Must not be too good. It won't do.

People will see nothing in a saint

Or saintess in common with themselves,

And so will not like them.

I'm no saint myself, Annette,
When I'm acting, or - well, just living.
Perhaps you will make me one.
We shall see. Now I'll continue.
This main star, which is I,
Was the girl's lover once,
Scorned not by her, but by fate's doings.
And this night they meet; which meeting
Is not her doing, nor his,
Though he is a skunk. Such things happen."
Poor Annette is overcome now,
Not by wonderment this time, but sleep.
So he rolls the script, sneering
At rules that say not to roll 'em.
He has accepted it himself. Lucy too.
And tomorrow it shall be tested.

Lopez was not Aristos' friend,
Nor enemy, now or before.

They were just cool, one to the other,
Overclouded skies, but no thunder.
They had labored and loafed in company,
Had slept side by side more than once.
But Lopez had no ambition. Aristos had.
So they had parted.
No hard words spoken; no tears
In open or in secret;
No vow of everbearing friendship:
"We shall meet again, with God's grace!"
Or, "Begone forever from my life,
Cuckoo bird!" No such things.
Mummers do not part for good,
Until, perhaps, at the last sad parade,
Nor hardly even then. The earth
Is no larger under than above.
So it will be then as now:
"Hello, Jake, hello, Jane!"
In some narrow hole, rubbing noses,

Or the knees of one against the other's back.
"Got a cigarette? Thanks.
Now take your elbow, please do,
Out from my eye-socket. Thanks again.
Where are you going?.... So am I."
So it was with Lopez, slender and pale,
And Aristos, short and strong,
But older than Lopez. At the depot,
Crossing paths, they muttered frozen greetings,
In lobbies of hotels they smoked,
Swore in dressing rooms and behind drops.
Lopez, not much of anything,
Had no ambition of his own.
He felt content to understudy anyone,
Take up a thread left slack
Or broken by friend or foe.
He saw Aristos' sketch, heard the thunder
Of a thousand pair of palms.
He saw it from the wings, saved his hands thus,

And needed merely say: "It goes well."
And after show again: "It went well."
Then Lucy, now a star,
Arm in arm with Aristos, a star too,
Departed for some back-room.
So the sketch was still going,
Well or bad. So Lopez thought.
And here a part he could tackle
Without rehearsal. That was his point:
Knew how to act and when and when not.
So when Annette, a star's wife now,
Heard footsteps, strangely heavy,
Pass and repass in the hall,
Mysterious sounds on walls and doors,
Clapping together of shoes, blowing of nose,
And opened the door to see, what
Could she see there but Lopez, stupefied
To meet Annette, offhand thus,
In a hotel he had just moved into?

None thinking of the other, though they knew
One the other by face and name.
She always liked Lopez. He could talk
Of cows, fowls and the weather,
And do it so she felt he spoke of her
In praise. And she would blush though he
Made no bad suggestions, nor rolled eyes.
He spoke of the sketch, in praise;
Praised Aristos, and did it so
She liked him less and Lopez more.
"Yes, dear Annette, he is a great man.
Lucky girl you that I was not he
Who put up at your town that night.
Poor me! I am not jealous of him,
Though he has future and I none,
Yes, he has. That is, you know,
Such as actors have. But, what are we?
Mummers! A pack of swine
To whom no pearls are cast.

Beg your pardon. I take that back.
Pearls are cast to some swine,
But not to me. This is cruel.
Here I find a pearl, unsought by me,
Undiscovered by whom it's owned."
He beat his bosom, more in triumph than woe;-
Intending not to deceive so much, as to act,
For here he could act his best,
And be secured from those dreaded words:
"Don't be dramatic." Not from her.
To catch a word or meaning, half or full,
And not that so often,
Was all her little head could do.
"I am acting, you think. I am not,
I say. I never act - much; Others do;
To all the world and themselves,
Day and night. Some I've known
To mask the face before looking in a glass,
Smoothing out a weak line there

Putting a strong one here,
Afraid to show themselves as they are,
Even to themselves. Mummers.
I am myself. Take me or leave me.
As I sit ruminating in loneliness,
So he or she who comes to my door
Shall find me. Just for that
I shall leave my door open to-night.
I have key, but scorn the use of it.
I have faith in people, cat and rat alike.
So long, Annette, but not adieu, I hope."

Thus he disappeared next door, sighing,
And she remained alone, sighing too,
What for she did not know herself.
The clock struck one. The cuckoo bird
Called out his own name once.
And no Aristos, home at eleven otherwise.
Where was he? She had meant to ask,

But Lopz, as though content
To pour his soul out anywhere,
But nowhere answer questions, if not
In his own room, had given no chance.
She saw his silhouette now on the door,
Squatting about, seeking mislaid things,
Humming a lively tune, and that
As were he alone in an empty house,
Where no other soul could be close,
And no words could be spoken, except in soli-
loquy

He sees her silhouette on the door too,
All in surprise, sees it grow,
Stop, diminish, advance, hesitate, retreat,
Come again and grow steadily until
It disappears to leave Annette in place.
“Who’s there? What’s wanted? Ah! Come in!”
I-m-the-doctor like. She blushes;
Turns toes in and out. “I wanted to ask

Where Aristos is. Have you seen him?"
"Take that chair, Annette, and I'll take this
And explain. He is a star now,
And so is Lucy. Where are they now?
Rehearsing. Stars must do that,
Rehearse a scene or two, act over a piece
To make it seem more like life,
Before or after show -- mostly after.
Such things often take all night.
No; sit still. There is more to explain.
Leave the door open, but I'll lift
This window a bit, for air. Ah!
There goes the door! A puff of this eastwind
Will do things no man would dare.
But, no matter, since it is shut,
It must be God's will."

Aristos and Lucy, newmade stars,
Bade the waiter fare thee well to night;

And he flipt a newmade coin,
Shut the door to their booth,
Given them begrudgingly by him,
Though he now bore them no ill will
And muttering neither "stiff" nor "ham actor."
Then spake Aristos, glass in hand,
Shoving away the first empty quart,
"Here is to you, Lucy, and myself, Aristos,
Censors of people.
Revealers of life as she is lived
And approved by us and all the people
Who live as we have shown them how.
Ha, ha! What's the matter with that?
Here we are, stars all two;
I, the father, one might say,
For I've made you a star, you'll admit,
While I'm a selfmade star -- made myself.
At least I made the play that made us both.
But I owe you something, that's true,

More than you owe me. For you are young,
And I old, or getting so.
None could fill that part like you, Lucy;
No girl, young or old,
Would know better how it's done
In real life, than you, I fear.
So, what would I have done without you?
I, an old mummer who's had his word,
With nothing more to say, crying
Over spilt milk, like a country lass,
Rinsing the pail to color the water.
Did I say "country lass?" And you laugh.
You have never understood me,
Nor Annette, the girl I married
For what she didn't know of acting.
What could I do with a star,
Or a moon or a sun?--property of everyone --.
So must be or not exist at all.
And, who can tell?-- A farm may come in handy

When I am played out. And then
A milk maid too. I am a practical man.
You laugh. You are a star now.
And since you are, would you have me now,
And how? Well, one kiss, anyway.
Ah! Now I want you. No, I don't.
I don't know, myself. Another kiss will do,
And a hug -- there's no sin in that.
Let me go. I shall not kiss you again --
Not tonight. I am no skunk.
You laugh. You would do to me in this room
What I do to you in our act.
But why? There's no audience here,--
Except the waiter at the key-hole,--
To approve: "That's how we do it too.
And they're not acting either;
So, it must be allright."
I go home now. Fare thee well!
I go to find Annette, poor wife,

Waiting for me, heavy-eyed, or in bed,
Dreaming, but lonely just the same.
Good night!
True. Thus he finds her, snoring.
What! Snoring? Since when!
I've never heard that of her.
No matter. I must not awaken her. If I do
I shall have to do some acting,
And do it well. I, with Lucy's powder
On my sleeves and her painted lips
On my cheeks still, like a snake's bite.
I'll wipe 'em off. He makes no sound,
Yet Annette stirs in bed, gasping,
Rolls over once and back again,
Opens, shuts and opens her large eyes,
But avoids Aristos's soft gaze.
"What time is it? Three o'clock?
Lord! I thought it was only twelve!"
He takes her on his lap, softly, caressingly,

Babbling of their future,
When there shall be no more acting
In their lives, when no more shall she wait
In loneliness while he rehearses.
He, like she, came from a country town,
He, like she, was lured away
By this or that, good or evil.
No matter. Very soon they go dack,
Arm in arm, to solitude and happiness,
In triumph over all lures.
He has never understood girls,
Nor they him, he thinks. And so,
When Annette kisses him on the lips
And sobs, as in remorse, on his bossom,
This is a girl's way of loving, he thinks.

A MUMMER'S GHOST

This January night the ghosts come out
From the rooms their liberators abandoned,
Closing doors silently, or banging them
Like the people would have done themselves.
But one ghost has locked himself in
And will not come out, nor let others in.
This is the ghost of Lola Mervin, the dancer,
The world's greatest, if posters don't lie,
Who night before danced away with her only love.
Then as now she sat thus before and after shows,
Tampering with the window, pulling the shade,
While the other mummers cut up in the other
rooms,
Hammering on the walls, asking her to dance
While they would play on the violin and piano.
She only frowned on these crumbs;
Accepted no gifts, nor hardly gave any herself,

Except, perhaps a high kick
At a house of pale men, and that begrudgingly,
Like a bone to a hostile dog.
But someday she should dance, as she could,
To some single one, just one,
Not to a housefull of men avoiding her eyes.
They would move out the bed for more room,
Needing none: her dancing would satisfy him.
And he should sit on the window sill,
Ever pleading with her not to stop dancing.

So night before last he came, uninvited
Just as she had dreamt, out of nowhere--
Just came to her. But when she saw his face
She was frightened, as of a stranger of bad fame.
But, then, she had never dreamt of him as hand-
some.

What mattered it? She was ugly herself.
Still, when he leaned over her, whispering:

"You and I we elope tonight,"

She waved him away, saying: "I don't like you."

But he did not mind. "We elope tonight," he repeated.

And so she danced away with him.

BROTHER FABIAN

He was pinned to his bed for three months
And suffered like live bait.
He coughed until his insides were all wrong
And his lungs melted into gray slime,
Which he coughed up and spat on the wall.
And one day a gust of delirium
Blew out what was in his head too.
"This is rotten," he said. "I ain't sick.
Like hell you'll carry out my corpse!
Give me my stuff. I'm gonna leave,
Even if I'll drop dead."
One by one he put his rags on,
Took some stuff in a valise and stalked off,
Jerking his hump off a body with his gait like a
goose.
Somehow he got into a saloon
And told the people he had just gotten out of hell

And that no human hands could hurt him.
He wouldn't leave when told
And it began to look like a brawl,
When Israel Lincoln, the nigger bar porter,
Came in with metal-polish in a catsup bottle,
Hit him across the neck
And broke three joints.

HALF PAST SEVEN

I see the thin lady across the court
Has left the shade undrawn,
Putting on the pads for the day,
So none need know of her fasting.

The fat lady across the yard
Ropes her straight-jacket
To condone for her indulgencies.

Old landlady just wriggled past,
Rattling her old bones from the attic
With a rouge-pot hid under her apron.

Even the flowers out front
Are rouging up by blushing,
Pretending they'd rather not be picked.

Page God at his garret.

The world is made up for the day.

NOTRE DAME

Our lady is a grand lady.
It is as though she fills the atmosphere
With some kind of good germs
That infest men with a good plague;
For when she comes to Royale Inn,
Dropped in her silks and jewels from Paris,
Her body massaged with balsams from Memphis
And upholstered with pads from Philadelphia,
All men feel good toward other men
And smile to cleave their heads in two.
And see! Our manager feels merciful
Toward brother Simon, outcast waiter,
Who has a nose like a small baloon,
And shakes so his hat will not stay in place.
But now our lady cannot eat,
For she has seen brother Simon's face.
Who would not be stirred at sight of brother Si-

mon?

“That face,” says our lady. “That face--I--I--”
And manager Martin knows he has been foolish.
But still weak at heart toward mankind,
Gives brother Simon something before putting him
out.

And our lady sends Alex, her favorite,
Out with another alms for poor brother Simon.
Then charmingly and with great wit
Speaks to Alex. “Do you know? That nose
Made me feel as if something was about to blow
up.”

And Alex smiles and pockets another coin.
“Now I can enjoy my lunch,” says our lady.

A TOUCH

Hey, Paul, old top, hello, there!

Well, how are you, anyway?

I knew you were here,

So I came in to say

Hello--

You know,

Came in for a little chat.

It's bad weather, yes,

Awfully wet.

Got a headache? That's too bad!

Hope you'll soon get better.

Ought to get some pills for the head.

What's that? Got a letter?

S'that so?

Money? No?

Ha! ha! Is that the idea?

It's from a woman, eh?-

Yes, I see.

You say her name is Sue?

And, oh! she's a peach!

Oh, well, that I knew--

And what?-- Her father is rich?

Ye don't tell!

Well, well!

Things certainly look bright

For you in a pecunairy way

Allright.

Oh, say, by the way, d'ye know?

Talking of money, it just struck

My mind--you havn't five beans or so

Handy? No? Gee! That's tough luck?

And broke,

With nothing to hock.

Oh, well, it doesn't matter at all.

I'm much obliged to you, anyway.

So long, Paul.

•
ROOMS

A NIGHT'S LODGING

"Room for rent to single gentleman."
This sign, upside down,
Invited me, gentleman or no.
And there I stood, dripping with mud,
Waiting to hear someone rise from table,
Cough with bone in throat, or jump
From bed and step and tumble
Over the people of the dream.
Then I heard tampering of a key,
As of someone in doubt
If there was a key-hole there or not;
Or else stalling, playing for time
To reason if this caller's errand
Was to benefit or do harm.
What person, woman or man,
Has not, once at least, felt thus,
As I did, outside the door,

And he or she, inside? for who has not--
Separated by a door's thickness--
Once in life stood face to face
With future husband or wife,
Or lifelong enemy or friend?
But, romance was not my game;
And this way I could have spoken:
"Whosoever you are behind this door,
Open it and give me a room to hide in.
I am muddy, but no tramp.
Five minutes since I crawled in the gutter,
Knocked there by a drunken brute."
And the door opened and I saw
The face of my future landlady,
Looking into her new roomer's face.
She was a little woman, not much anywhere,
In youth or age. Old maid, I supposed,
Who had loved large men, but had found none
Who would put himself whole

Against a half of her, nor
Take her whole for a half of him.
I said I was the gentleman, gentleman, yes,
Of the sign, writ by her own hand,
In spite of mud and crushed hat.
She held the door, not wide open,
Nor merely half open, nor ajar,
But did it so, words were not needed
To let me know I had the choice
To enter or stay out. Good!
I did what I had come to do.
But, since no house is so small
I could not get lost therein,
It was for her to say where I lived,
Before I'd stir. The truth is,
I have never looked into a vacant room.
But having lived in it since that day.
She led me onward, through one room,
Then another, stopped at a door,

And would go no farther. Opened a door
And held it so for me.
And I knew I lived there.
I stepped in, but came out soon,
Holding my head. "Murder!" I said.
"I swear, missus, I have been hit
By a shoe, or, at least a slipper."
"Nonsense," she said. "Nobody hit you,
But I'm sorry, just the same.
A staircase, from upstairs down, was sunk
Through that room when this house was built;
But not so low I've noticed it much;
For I am small, as you can see yourself,
And pass under it with ease.
But you, tall as you are,
Better stoop a little, if absent minded,
Or your hat wont fit your head."
She left. I sat on the bed's edge,
Ruminating on my misfortunes. Ten minutes since

I was drowned in mud and slime,
And took several insults too.
I had promenaded in peace, grip in hand
Gray pants on, pressed under mattress two nights,
Black coat, from another suit,
But still in fair shape. Black tie,
White collar. The tie was nearly as good
As when found hanging on the dresser
In the room I just moved from.
The socks were not much, that I admit,
But the collar was allright.
In other words, all dressed up.
"And look at me now! Lord!
Where is the shoe brush?
I shall have to bathe, though it is Tuesday."
It happened thus: I felt a bump,
Felt the comb break in my vest's pocket,
Then fell plumb in the gutter's mud.
What had happened? How should I know?

I only saw a hat, same as mine,
And tried it on, over my own;
Then saw a man, bare-headed,
Stout and bandy-legged, rise from this mess,
Made by him for himself and me,
As were it no uncommon thing for him.
"Hey, mister," I shouted. "Your hat,
If I'm not mistaken," seeing him,
Unmindful of me and his loss,
Preparing to make off without it.
He came back. Looked me over.
Then laughed to his heart's content,
A laugh men like I don't sleep well after.
"Yes, that's my hat. Thanks. And now
I suppose I ought to ask your pardon.
Well, I don't know. You were in my way,
Weren't you? But for you,
I might have gone clean myself.
Saving this delay besides.

And another thing. I'll say I've made
Bigger messes of bigger things than you
In my life.
I thought it was a lamp post I collided with."
Thus he left, drunken brute,
Heaping insult upon violence.
A saloon. That's where he came from.
I saw the swing doors still swinging,
Where he had been helped out
By half a dozen men,--not less,--
For he was a big man. And I, a weakling.
What could I do to him? A brute,
My size twice over and drunk;
Or, at least he had enough within him
To back an argument with.
I waited till he made a corner,
Then called out, yet not so loud:
"You drunken gutter-rat! After this
These gutters shall be yours

To fall in as you damn please.”
But, on second thought, why let such a skunk
Drive me’ from my chosen hunting-ground?
I was out to find lodgings,
Not crawl in gutter; though some
Sleep thus. I’ve seen it done.
So I shook my doggish hide and swore
I’d find a room on this street or none,
If only for a single night.
So I had done; and here I was
In the house of a widow or an old maid,
Ruminating on words for a violent speech
I should have used on my assaultant.
I felt weak then, now strong.
If I had him here now, I’d--
Well, what should I have done?
Talk the legs from under him,
Use fierce and magic words, not known by him
Wherefore he would think them smart.

I put a thumb under his nose,
Finger over his hat's brim, then press
Together. And then what?
What if he should bear me ill will?
But, why dwell on scenes
From which cowards hastily betake themselves?
So that was settled, and well done.
Now I felt I could show my face
To brother man again. I went to walk.
I met Landlady, who stepped in my path,
To hear how I had disliked my room,
Or else what I had found missing.
I made some remark, forget what--
Some such thing new roomers say
To new landladies. She turned to the kitchen.
I thought I had heard splashing of water,
As of someone rising from the bath.
Just then the bathroom door came ajar,
And half of a naked, brutish man popped out

And hung suspended as though from ropes.
"Bath towel!" he shouted. "Hand me one.
If you don't know where they are,
I do. Just look for them
Wherever you think they are not
And you will find them. But do it quick,
Or call the ambulance;
For I'm no more immune to colds
Than other people, I suppose. Hello!"
I had been thinking of flight, again,
While cussing the earth for being so small;
But when I heard his "hello!" it was too late.
I yearned to sit alone on a star,
Behind the moon or in the shade
Of some dead old sun.
Had there been an open door,
My legs should have served me well.
"This is our new roomer," that from her.
"That's my husband. What's your name?"

“Never mind his name,” this from him,
The naked half of a bathing husband.
“I may be wrong, but don’t think so.
We two have met before, and that to-day.
If he’s a new roomer of ours,
He’ll know us for what we are,
By name or nickname. And what he calls himself,
What’s in that? We’ve never heard of him,
Since he did not start this war,
Neither built a city nor burnt one,
Fiddling in the meanwhile.
But where’s that towel? Thanks!”
He hung it over his wrist, like a waiter,
Then tried it over his red and fleshy shoulder.
“Do you remember, Mary, how long
It is now since Froelisch left?
One month? I thought it was more.
And, let’s see--he was with us
How long? One year, almost, yes.

Good for him. And I'll say this,
He's never stayed elsewhere that long,
And never will, nor above earth,
Unless he mends his way of living.
For you know, Mary, as well as I,
Your cooking gave him another year
To live and raise the devil in.
Where is he now? I don't know.
But he'll come back, I know that.
Then you tell him we have another
In his place, who, if I'm not mistaken,
Needs and will appreciate a woman's cooking.
My Mary's small." This to me. "It seems
She's always giving--never taking.
She herself is the only one
Her cooking wont make a giant of.
Look at me then at yourself
And see a before-and-after-taking picture.
Ha, ha!" He grabbed a piece of flesh

On his chest and squeezed it.
"This is what you need, young man,
To make a roughneck out of you.
And this is the stuff she'd put on you,
So you could laugh any man in the face
And snatch a cigarette from any mouth."
Now the woman spoke. "And suppose
He hates roughnecks--do you think
He'd want to be made one?
By your talk there's nothing else
A man would want to live for but flesh,
Because you have nothing else.
And who gave you that? I, you say.
I am sorry I did, for it may part us,
Giving another woman a chance
To take away what I have given."
Then to me: "He's no gentleman, sober or drunk.
Don't take stock in his gabbering."
He dropped his head, nodding.

“Well, maybe you’re right;
But there’s no harm in being healthy.
And don’t think I’m imposing on you to board
here.

I’d make little money from a boarder, anyhow;
Considering the extra work for my wife,
Even though she’d just as soon
Cook for three as two, let alone
The money’d come in handy when I’m not work-
ing.

In the meantime, this is your house.

If your room is too small,

It’s your fault: for we don’t rent

Just a room to our roomer, but the whole house.

There’s fruit on the table, day and night,

Good times or bad; for my Mary will buy

Apples, pears and grapes from every whop,

Even with my last dime.

They are yours, like all other things

That strikes your fancy.”

He disappeared. The door slammed,
And, if splashing of water has a meaning,
He dropped bodily in the tub.
I slipped out.

That night I lingered outside, hour by hour,
And but for a token, well remembered,
Of a previous visit to this camping place,
I should have had reason to doubt:
For I’ve entered houses, rented rooms,
Not looking at number, nor name of street,
Then returned, entering other houses,
Where no one knew me, asking them
If I lived there, or if they knew
An old woman, fat or lean,
Whom I had paid for future lodging.
I reasoned: “The wife seems good.
But, what of it? They can take Froelisch back.
I won’t return. The grip

Can go to the devil and he too.
But I had sworn to take the first room,
If only for one night, that's true.
But I had broken oaths before
To my own self; so small case would there be
To condemn myself for that.
An hour since the naked shape
Of my landlord had blackened the shade,
But now all lights were out.
Still I doubted. "I'm a fool," I reasoned,
"To pick this place to live in.
That staircase cuts through my room,
Hanging over my head, and people,
Who I can't see walk up and down.
And since I lie just under their feet,
And they walk over me from head to foot,
As were I a corpse in shallow ground,
I'll wish myself dead and buried deep.
But, my grip. Well, not much in that.

Still, too much to lose;
For I'm a poor man. Let it go.
That's foolish. I'll get it out.
And, to beat another weak spell,
I bursted into the darkness within
And fell over an unseen chair.
Someone gasped. Perhaps I,
Or those in bed. Then: "Hello!"
Greeting I knew who uttered.
And I wondered if he was naked still.
"I would have let you pass,
Leaving you think us sleeping;
For we were--I anyhow, but came to think
Rocking chairs in the dark
Have caused broken skulls.
I broke a leg that way myself.
Still, I've seen you turn somersaults.
Ha, ha! I told Mary. She laughed too.
She'll brush you off to-morrow.

But don't do it over here in the dark,
For we couldn't see you, nor enjoy
To have you or furniture broken.
This reminds me of Froelisch, whose place
You are here to take. He used to swear
His door had been walled in, or,
Had been changed to where no door ever was.
One dark night, 2; A.M., I heard
A noise in the kitchen. "Who's there?"
"This is I, Froelisch. Anyway, I think so.
I was looking for matches and lost myself,
But found no match. Where am I?"
"I'm afraid," I said, "you shall find me
Less interesting than--what was his name?
Froelisch?" I struck a match.
And that ended it for the night.
"Don't forget the fruit," he shouted
As I shut my door. "Help yourself."

Fruit? I had come for my grip.
The room rent paid be damned.
Also my landlord. I heard their whispering.
Of what? Of me, of course. What else
Could keep them whispering after midnight?
“Say, Mary, you put a bowl of fruit
In his room, the first thing in the morning.
He’ll never touch them otherwise.
Remember Froelisch? how he used to grab ’em
Right under your nose? ‘If none on the table,
He knew where the ice-box was;
If none there, either, he’d know why,
And when there would be some.”
Froelisch--bah! Who was he?
What had we in common, that I
Should be compared with him,
By people in bed, after midnight?
A cat came at the window,
Leaned against the glass, raising her back,

As had we always been good friends.
Thought I was Froelisch, I suppose.
And the people stretched in bed
Rubbed their hands, so I thought,
Chuckling with satisfaction:
"There he lies now in Froelisch's bed."

At dawn I sat on the bed's edge,
Ruminating still, with the grip--
Two hearty curses to that--
At my hand's reach. I hearkened to their breathing,
Repeating: "Now is the time.
It is at dawn that people sleep the soundest."
They slept in front, I in back.
My way led by their brass bed.
I cursed my luck and moved on.
I came to a stove, wondered what that was
And who had put it there.
Then a rocker. I swore things had been changed.

Yet I repeated: "People sleep soundly at dawn."
And soon I stood at the vestibule's door,
One hand prying over its panes
Like a huge spider. I found the knob--
"Up so early?" That was him;
And his voice was not sleepy.
I reasoned: "What of it if he
Disdains sleep for waking? Some men do;
Others rise at dawn." This I said:
"I go to work at five." I hoped
He had no cat's eyes, and saw
Neither me nor grip. To separate us two
For ever and ever--what an easy trick!
To throw open a door and slam it shut!
A trick, yes, and one I've never learnt,
Nor ever will. For, if a door swings out,
I pull first, then push,
And tumble bodily out.
If it swings in, I push first,

Then pull it in my face. So I did.
I lost my head, with contents all,
And the grip and what was in that.
Clock rolled under their bed and rang there,
Trustworthy thing! "His grip!"
This was a woman's gasping.
But he lay mute and unmoved,
And I was still among living men.
"Well, I'm moving." And this I said
As calm as were it a year after.
"And on an empty stomach," he meditated.
"Froelisch wouldn't have done that.
Mary would have made coffee, if told.
But there's some fruit on the table.
Take an apple in your pocket. Eat it
On the way to where you're going."
I, like a mastiif, crammed my head
Under their bed, after my clock.
I found it still ringing; locked my grip--

“Ha, ha!” Him talking again.
“That door swings in. Funny thing,
I never remembered it myself
Until it gave me a cleft forehead.
The outer door swings in too.
Well, good luck.” Was his farewell.

IN A STRANGE ROOM

When I came to this lodging-house
I wondered what it was
Lying on a sofa by the wall.
May have been someone dead
I saw in the hall,
Wrapped in the sheets of this bed.

Last night was cold. Ice froze
On my window. Someone flatened a nose
On the glass over the sill.
I opened it from within,
And all was still--
Only air came in.

I feared to hark,
I feared to look into the dark,
Fearing I was not alone;

Waited as for my doom
To hear whispered in an undertone:
“What are you doing in my room?”

THE NORTH WIND

He'll awaken me tonight, I suppose,
Putting his shoulders against a chimney,
Whistling with asthma.
Anyhow, if I haven't a pencil or knife
In every known space
Between sash and door and window-frame,
He will find it for me,
And have me out of bed to put something in.
Then he'll pass along
Through all those rooms the mummers left to the
ghosts,
Shutting a door here and there left open,
To let some ghost out
The last time he went south.
So peace be with the mummers this night,
Where they sit at the coffee-house,
Lingering over their empty cups;

For, though the doors bang the house down,
I shall know it is not they
Going for and bringing coffee.

ICE ON THE WINDOW

Whosoever those people be,
And what they want or seek here,
Tonight, this winter's coldest night,
They shall trip up to my window
To press their faces to the glass.
Then disappear to where the wind leads.
I shall not see them,
For I shall sleep,
Sleep under all my clothing,
And all things that will stay over me.
But at dawn I shall see their faces,
Greeting me,
From the glass where the frost left them,
As though they were still there,
Making fantastic faces
Like fathers amusing children.
I would invite all these strangers

To sit rubbing hands by the stove,
For I bear them no ill will.
At least I shall make a fire,
Even with the last blocks of wood,
And they, all, even the sullen and forbidding,
Shall be touched by gratitude
And go away in tears.

A CAT

When the auctioneer has sold the last chair
Or doormat, and the rustle of the last wagonload
Has not yet died, she will perch on the step
And wait for the door to open,
Though she knows there are no people in the house,
Knowing that sometime the door will open,
Be it by wind or the landlord himself.
If they took her with them in a basket,
Covered by pillow-top, she would be back
Next morning, as had she never been away.
Why should she change houses? Move somewhere
Where she should be new, like a new roomer,
Always new, no matter what place,
Where a dog might share the basement with her.
She knows this basement, ratholes and all,
And cares not if there is another in the whole world.
If another family moves in,

She will accept them, but not love them,
For she has no love, man, devil, or ghost.
She likes people when they give her food,
But won't hate them if they don't,
Nor even if they kick her out.
If they put milk in a saucer for her,
She will drink it and lick her paws
As if amused, purring: "Why do they give me milk?"
But if the house is empty or occupied
By people who don't give milk to cats,
She will not mind. Rats make good food.
And she will stay even after they are gone,
By their own choice, or eaten by her.
And if they come to tear the house down,
She will be interested, but not alarmed;
Will sit watching, walk around inspecting,
Dodging bricks that miss the shute,
Or pushed down by a negro's elbow.
And fall what may: girders, rafters and studs,

She will escape untouched, unalarmed,
To perch out of danger and lick her paws
And purr: "Everything is alright."
If they build a new house over the old basement,
She will be in it when the new people come.

WAR AND REBELLION.

SEEN

I saw the rebellion.
Thought I heard noises as of barefoot people
Racing over sheet-iron roofs.
Then two men passed with a stretcher
Containing one dead man.
And all the while snow was falling,
Softly, silently,
Like snow that always falls in April.

WORDS OF PETROVITCH,
STEET-ORATOR

Bring in the dead.

Gather in the bones.

Dig them up from where dogs have buried them,

Gather them where ploughs have unearthed them,

Wrench them from beaks of scavangers,

From jaws of beasts;

From plough shares,

And bring them to the morgue.

Fetch now the senators,

The prime ministers,

The chancellors.

Wrench them out from palaces and castles,

With crowbars,

Like worms from under bark.

Snatch chairs from under them,

Drag them out beds,

Ooze them out from their caverns,
Like badgers,
With smoke of bonfires of bones.
Shuffle them along to the morgue.
Let them count the dead.

COMPANY OF SIX

I seek these six men:
Ivan, Petrov and Jacobovitch,
Charsky, Koschmir, Pindar.
Have they gone this way forward?
Yesterday I saw them in the flax-field,
By the burner-wall of the brick-kiln,
Digging a hole in the earth there.
Wild and strange were their features,
Their temples were high, their eyes sunken -
And blarred with sweat from their foreheads.
They dug like dogs of the prairie,
A hole in the ground for the winter.
They seemed strangers on this earth,
Out of an unknown and far off region.
But they seemed to seek something,
And twelve weaponed muskovits
Stood by and peered into the opening,
Wondering, no doubt, what they had lost there,

And curious to see what they should find.
But I have visited that flax-field this day
And found the earth leveled where they dug.
I seek Ivan, Petrov, Jacobovitch,
Charsky, Koschmir, Pindar.
Who has seen these men hereabouts?
And what road have they taken?

THE REBELS

Came rumors of disaster,
Of the fall of the crown,
But Ivan Ivanitch was master
At Tchekolov town.

Then came news concerning
The murder of the tzar,
And he saw mujicks returning
From the war.

More and more, rank on rank,
Mujicks back from war,
Sang strange songs and drank
Vodka at the tavern bar.

Next day they lay in the sun,
Wishing they were rich.
One pointed his gun
At Ivan Ivanitch.

It was the mujick Amirkar,
Who, like each ancestor,
Had gone to the war,
Loyal to his master.

"You must not do that."
Said Ivan. "There is danger."
They only stared at
Ivan as at a stranger.

That night it seemed he heard
Rustling as of ghosts.
When he made light and stirred
They stood rigid as posts.

Amirkar and Petrov,
All his mujicks were there.
Two were behind the stove,
Three were on the stair.

Petrov carried a packet,
Another had a sack,
Amirkar had Ivan's jacket
Slung over his back.

"Leave those things be."
Ivan Ivanitch said.
"You mussn't steal from me.
Stealing is bad."

Anger curled his lip.
He shouted a command.
But it was not heeded. The whip
Was taken from his hand.

One day Petrova, his wife,
Heard news from the tavern bar.
"Ivan," she said, save thy life,
Or die like the tzar."

Shadows came to his face,
Gray as plaster,
But his calm gaze
Said: "I am master."

At dusk Petrova had flown
From the fate of the tzar,
And Ivan sat alone
With tea on the samovar.

He stroke the cat on his knee
And looked at the evening star.
Forgot the glass of tea
Cold on the samovar.

"Ho, ho! Good evening lad!
How are you tonight?"
Then he saw the knife and said:
"O yes, that's right."

Mujicks with heads bared
Came from the tavern bar,
Stood at the window and stared
At the works of Amirkar.

They saw the crepuscule's red
Over the tavern lawn;
Shaded their eyes and said:
"Look! That's the dawn!

FLESH and IRON

Flesh is softer than iron.

Hear the thud

Of the flesh

Struck by iron,

See the splash

Of blood,

The crust

Of warm blood

On the iron,

The rust,

Like dry mud

On the flesh

Struck by iron.

Flesh is cooler than iron.

Hear the rip

Of the flesh

Burnt by iron,
Like the slash
Of a whip
Held in claws of iron;
The wheeze
Of a burning piece
Of hot flesh
Like the tongue of a beast
Hot on the wrist
Of a demon of iron.

Flesh is weaker than iron.
Hear it moan
When cut to the bone
By a sharp iron,
The groan
Of the bone,
The crack
Of the bone,

Like the whack
Of a spade thrust
Against a stone
Under the earth's crust.

Flesh is harder than iron.
See the spark
Of red light
Of flesh and iron
In the dark,
Like a beconing light
Of fire in
The desert of night.

Flesh is stronger than iron.
Hear the crash--
Bing! Bong!
When the flesh,
Hot and strong

And untyring,
Like a giant gong
Beats the cracking iron,
The shout
Of the flesh, breathing hot
Over the rust
Of the broken iron
Ground to dust.

OTHERS

AN OLD JEW

Some early mornings I look through
My window at a peddling Jew.

The Jew is old, the song he sings
Is a song of old and thrown off things.

They say he lives out by the park,
Deep in a basement, damp and dark.

The children out there think he is
The devil himself and shriek and hiss

At him, throw stones and sic
The dogs at him. He grabs a stick

And howls: "I'll spank you, every one."
Then pursues until his breath is gone.

They laugh at him and he stands there
And shakes his stick and gasps for air.

"You brats," he gasps. "You think you can
Sic dogs at me, a sick old man!"

One day he came beneath my lattice
And staged a terrero--that is,

Chanted a shrill, monotonous chant
To my old shoes, dried up and bent.

Throughout his song his Jewish eye
Peered at the sill, and I knew why;

For, if he awakens some slumberer in bed,
Sometimes a flower-pot drops on his head.

And he will stoop, pick up his hat
And cuss: "I'll get you for that."

I looked beneath my bed, and there
Lay some old shoes I couldn't wear.

"I'll give him those," I said, and went
And opened the window in good intent.

I saw him limp beside the walling
As if evading something falling.

I knew not why, and wondered why until
I missed my flower-pot upon the window-sill.

I leaned out and felt like few
Have ever felt for that old Jew.

FAITH IN PEOPLE

A multitude of better men than he
Through many centuries past
Have despaired of that thing:
Yet brother Sabio, because he is a good man
And never did any person harm,
Thinks that his enemies will see some good in him
And that people won't say of him
He is a drunkard and a dope-fiend and what not.
Lord! have mercy upon him in his insanity.

RIVER PHANTASIA

Like a huge piece of a mirror,
Varicolored and broken,
The river lay under me.
I stood on the bridge,
And leaned over the railing
And hung over it
And looked into it
And saw myself in it.

I lay on the bottom.
My body was broken,
And the lines of my features
Were distorted and crazy.
I lay on my back
In the muck of the bottom.
And the mouth quivered
As though pleading
For a drop of water.

Then a breeze blew over,
And the arms of my image
Stretched up towards me,
Shaking and quivering
As though deliriously yearning
To embrace me
And drag me down there.
Then the arms sank down;
And the body quivered,
And the mouth opened and widened,
And water came out of it,
Bubbling to the surface,
As it laughed crazily
And fiendishly at my horror.

Then the breeze stopped blowing;
An I lay still and stared
And gaped in despondency,
As though understanding

That nobody could ever
Lend me a hand
And pull me out of the mire.

KISSES

“Somebody has taken the old boat again.
And here is some bait.
It must have been Herbert,
For none but he would go fishing;
Forgetting his bait behind
And not return for it.
Little good bait would do him, though;
For I’ve never seen him bring back much fish,
Even when others came home with swamped boats.
I don’t think he really goes out to fish.
Though for what else a man would row out
In a leaky hulk this time of day
Isn’t for a woman like I to say.
But there may be something in what he said once
About him sitting out there in the boat
At twilight, just before calm.
He said the dying wavelets beat against the hulk

Like a woman's lips against a cold brow,
And reminds him of a thousand kisses
He might have had but missed.
Men about here laugh at that joke,
And he too, but not like they.
I shouldn't think any of our men
Could be reminded by wavelets
Of what they might have had in life, but missed,
If it wasn't fish.
I figure we folks around here
Haven't missed much
Of what there is in life for us to have.
It wouldn't be fair to say that of Herbert, though,
For he was never really one of us.
There might have been more for him to have,
And since he has had no more than we,
It may be he has missed more.
There he comes now. I'm going in.
You'd better come too,
So he won't know we've seen the bait.

CRUTCHES

The legs of poor Ephraim
Are stone dead,
And are of no use to him.
He has a hump also, and his head,
Like bird in nest,
Lies deep between the shoulders, which protude
Out of the chest.
When the people dance by,
Alas! he is much akin
To a kettle cannibals have hung high
On sticks to boil something in.

A VISITOR

A knock!
Hello! Who's there,
Leaning on the bannister?
O, it's you, Despair!
Come on in
Take a chair.

Glad to see you, old thing.
Good old Despair,
Glad you're back.
Let's see what you bring
In your sack.
Show your ware.

I like your simple ways,
Good old Despair.
I know you will stay



For days and days
Beside me on this chair.
I need not worry
About you leaving.
Good old Despair
Is in no hurry
To go anywhere.
Yet I should not be grieving.

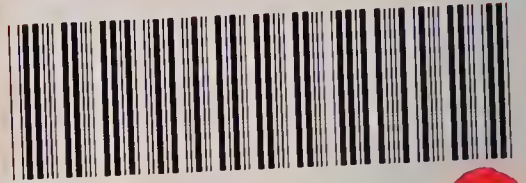
ADVERTISEMENT

An admission of guilt followed by a supplication for pardon at the beginning of a book, though not headed with caveat emptor, must look too much like a warning to the prospective reader. Therefore I desire to say at the end of this book that the many typographical errors the reader may have found in perusing these pieces have been seen by me, but the uncommon circumstances under which the book has been printed and bound has made it impossible to correct them.

The Author.

Koch, Missouri, Feb. 24th, 1923.

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